

# Not Very Much

George W. Coffin

MAGGIE Malone tucked ticket number 1065 into her shabby purse and said goodbye to Dominic. Each evening he gave her a ride home from the department store where she worked as a seamstress in the alterations room. Tonight, Dominic had sold her a quarter chance in a pool sponsored by the Italian churches of the city; he had sold the chances all along his vegetable route. At first Maggie argued that she just couldn't afford it. Why, she was behind on her rent as it was, and if it weren't for the kindness of old Mrs. Ruben, she'd be without a room now. It took a long time to pay doctor bills on her salary, and when a body was old they stayed sick for such a long time that the bills came high. But Dominic said it was all for the Church, and, after all, wouldn't the good Lord and all the saints see to it that she won?

She switched on the light in the drab third-floor room, and while the tea water boiled over the hotplate, she sat at the table and turned the pool ticket over and over on the cracked, washed-out oilcloth. If she won the \$250 top prize, just think of all she could do. Why, the back rent could be paid up, and Dr. Gross would have his \$25 too. And she would pay her rent for six whole months in advance and buy herself a new coat — a fine one of heavy cloth with a bit of fur trim to keep it in style. And once in a while, on Sunday afternoons, she'd have Mrs. Ruben and Agnes Flaherty, and Molly Grady up to high tea — only she'd have to have

Agnes one time and Molly another, because she remembered that there were only three silver spoons left. And she'd buy some tins of meat and some white bread from the grocery; and she'd have a nice little pot of quince jelly, and maybe she'd even manage a cake. It was a long time since she'd had anyone up to tea, so long that she was almost too ashamed to accept their invitations. And now that Christmas was comin' on, she'd buy her nephew, Tim, a nice gift this year, and she'd have a nice crisp bill to drop into the basket by the crib at church, and — but the water boiled over, sputtering on the glowing red metal, and interrupted her thoughts.

She poured her tea and as she carried the cup back to the table, she paused before the little plaster St. Patrick on the shelf and addressed him.

"I know it isn't really right to want all these material things, but couldn't y' sort of speak to Himself about those I-talians at the drawin' on Tuesday?" She smiled hopefully at the figure, but St. Patrick kept a firm grip on his crozier and looked straight ahead into the grey space.

Wednesday evening, in their home on Summit Hills, Mrs. Walters rambled through the day's news to her husband who was too absorbed in his paper to pay much attention. Occasionally he would grunt a response and reach out for his coffee, otherwise she might have talked to an empty chair.

"And Betty's going to marry again, although I don't know she'll manage. Harry won't have a thing to do with her child, and she's no place to leave the poor



little thing. And, Frank, I bought that dress at Cecil's; you know, the one I told you about. Now don't get mad again, you see I won \$250 on a pool ticket that the vegetable man sold me last week — which reminds me that I'll have to see if he can't get watercress for me before the club comes on Saturday. But, as I said, it's really not so expensive now, the dress, I mean, because with the \$250, and he'll bring that tomorrow, the dress will only be \$75 more."

"Holy Christ!" Mr. Walters put down his paper and gave his wife full attention for the first time that evening. "It wasn't just that particular dress I was talking about. It was the money you've been spending on everything lately. This isn't wartime anymore, Sal. Prices are high, labor's a headache, and there aren't any sure contracts or priorities from the government now. And as far as that two-fifty goes, you know you lost more than that at gin-rummy when you went to the coast last month. I suppose now that it's ordered you'll have to have the dress; but, damn it, Sal, take it easy. Two-fifty towards your bills isn't very much—not very much."

That same evening Maggie again sat drinking her evening tea. She looked up at the figure on the shelf where a vigil light had burned since she bought the chance. After a long solemn stare she finally brightened and said, "Well, it's not like the quarter was lost. Five dollars is five dollars these days, and I can be thankful for that much. I should have known that old Maggie would never hit it that lucky. But thank y' and bless y' anyway. I'll pay part of what I owe Mrs. Ruben and at least I'll be sure of my room. It's all right, but when I think of the plans I had, well, it's just not very much — not very much."

And when she looked away, St. Patrick, who had pretended he hadn't noticed, smiled into the dancing flame in the liquid wax depths of the ruby glass. St. Patrick smiled because he knew the three I-talians were shouting in excited and gestured conversation down at Holy Angels' Church.

"This-a old fool, Dominic, he's-a can't read his own writin'. He's-a tell Mrs. Walters she's-a wonna big prize. But the number, she's notta 1056, she's-a 1065. And whatta-ya-know, she's-a only win a five dollars. You lose a good customer, Dominic; that's-a **too bad!**"

Dominic frowned when he thought of what his wife would say. The Walters' bought lots of stuff from him, more than any other customer. And of course he could just go ahead and pay it. He'd already told Maggie, and she wouldn't know the difference.

But old St. Patrick smiled because he knew the I-talian would be afraid to cheat, seein' it was church money and all, and sort of holy-like. And somewhere not so far away, Himself smiled and nodded as St. Patrick whispered into the whisp of smoke from the dying flame, "Sure an' it's not very much anyway—not very much."

